

How I read the Bible (3)

Scripture is Christ-centred

Hebrews 1:1-3

Let me remind you of those guiding principles I try to follow as I read, study and preach the Bible.

- First, I believe Scripture speaks for itself.
- Second, all Scripture is Christ-centred.
- Third, Scripture is an unfolding story.
- Fourth, Scripture can only be understood under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Fifth, Scripture belongs to the people of God.
- Finally, Scripture is to be obeyed.

It is the second of these principles we turn to this evening. This is a principle that is part of our Baptist DNA. The Baptist Union *Declaration of Principle*, under which this church is constituted, opens with the words: “That the Lord Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice.”

Such Christ-centered approach to Scripture does not assume that Jesus is physically present in every verse of the Bible. Neither would I claim that every verse makes a direct reference to Jesus. Nor do I assume that every passage is a symbol of Jesus. While Jesus is physically present in some passages, is directly referenced in others and there are many symbols that point to him, it is irresponsible and simply wrong to assume that Jesus is present everywhere in the Bible.

On the other hand, a Christ-centered approach assumes that every passage in the Bible is in some way connected to the Gospel. Further, it assumes that we need to explore that connection to fully understand and apply each passage.

At first it may seem the claiming Scripture to be Christ-centred is to state the obvious. The problem comes when we start to dig below the surface. Much modern study of Scripture has adopted an analytical approach, breaking up each book into component parts. The connecting links are unravelled, and the Bible is reduced to a series of bare primary units. There is certainly value in this, but we

need to see the unity as well as the diversity of Scripture, the all-embracing end as well as the scattered beginnings. I prefer on the whole a synthetic rather than an analytical approach, seeing Scripture as an integrated whole, with Christ everywhere as the bond of union.

Having grown up in a strongly reformed evangelical background I noticed that many of my teachers laid a greater emphasis on the finished work of Christ than they did on the person of Jesus. This is most plainly seen in the preference often shown to the writings of Paul. Gospel stories had a tendency to become illustrations of Paul's teaching. The central tenet of faith (and the measure of theological soundness) was the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. I want to stress that being a Christian does not begin and end with theological orthodoxy. Certainly, belief is important, but it must never be separated from a personal commitment to Jesus. Jesus is not only the grounds of the doctrine of salvation, he is also our example. We are called, first and foremost, to follow him, that is, to look to him, to see what he does, and to do the same.

This means that when we come to Scripture, any Scripture, the first question on our minds and hearts is how does my relationship with Jesus enable me to understand and apply this passage in today's world? As I said earlier, understanding all Scripture to be Christ-centred is not to say that every verse of the Bible is a direct or indirect reference to Jesus, that way of interpreting stories that finds Jesus everywhere, such as the scarlet cord Rahab tied in her window (Joshua 2:18). But if we believe that God has a plan for salvation and the redeeming of all things (Ephesians 1:3-14) and that that plan has been underway from even before the creation of the world (4) and that Jesus is the fulfilment of that plan, it follows that each step along the way is a step in the journey towards Jesus. No interpretation of Scripture that leads to a different end can be called Christ-centred.

Perhaps the most debated issue here is Jesus and the Law. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them." Two things are worthy of note. Firstly, Jesus sees both the Law and the Prophets as one and that both have a prophetic role. The Law looks forward to God's future as much as the prophets do. Secondly, this anticipation is fulfilled in Jesus. Much argument centres around this word but I would suggest that the best way to understand what Jesus means by 'fulfil' is to look at the other times Matthew uses this particular word, and the one significant usage is Matthew's interest in Jesus as 'fulfilling' the Old Testament. There are about eleven times when Matthew points out that: "These things happened in fulfilment of..." Scripture point to Jesus and Jesus fulfils Scripture. It is this prophetic pointing to Jesus that can never pass away.

A second example of a Christ-centred interpretation of Scripture follows on from our discussion last time. We spoke briefly about *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye,

the Old Testament principle of proportional retribution. One thing we did not mention is that Jesus makes a 'new' interpretation of this in Matthew 5:38-42. Indeed, in that chapter Jesus several times says, "You have heard it said... but I say to you..." One other occasions Jesus was willing to reinterpret Scripture (eg: Sabbath keeping in 12:1-8). By these actions Jesus openly claims a special position in relation to the Law, the Prophets, the Writings and Israel's history.

Besides looking back into the Old Testament we also need to look forward into the rest of the New Testament if we are to get a fuller picture of a Christ-centred interpretation of Scripture. Paul goes some way to answering this himself when he says, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (1 Corinthians 2:2) Paul does not see himself as 'developing' the life, ministry and teaching of Jesus. His task is to declare what he knows, what has already been revealed in Jesus. Two convictions drove Paul: (1) that Jesus Christ is Lord, that in him God provided for the salvation of all who believe and (2) that he, Paul, was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul in an interpreter not an innovator. And as with Paul so with the other New Testament writers.

If this interpretation is correct (and I believe it is) then it has two implications for us. The first is that we cannot understand and interpret any part of Scripture apart from Jesus. Secondly, we have a calling to so interpret, that is, it is our task to take what we know of Jesus and make that story accessible to those around us. We cannot go beyond Jesus, but we must go all the way with him.

Amen.

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